

**Bill Ashcroft, Frances Devlin-Glass and Lyn McCredden. *Intimate Horizons: The Post-Colonial Sacred in Australian Literature*. Hindmarsh: ATF Press, 2009, v, 364pp.**

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This book argues that Australian writers of fiction and poetry in the second half of the twentieth century, who were influenced by indigenous understandings of land, kinship and spirituality, 'led the way in uncovering a sacredness peculiar to Australia ... sacredness imagined in intimate relationship to place, not pre-eminently a universal or transcendent discourse' (2). This type of argument is not new and emerges from the effects of the secularization process, which from approximately 1960 saw a radical diminution of the presence of institutional religion, which in the West meant the Christian churches, in the public sphere and in the private lives of individuals. Faced with the retreat of religion and the increasing irrelevance of traditional theology, substitutes for religion were found among human social products. The analogical relationship between the activity of God in creating the world and that of the artist (literary, visual, musical) in creating artworks was seized upon, and literature and the visual arts were hailed as the source of transcendence, the medium through which the serious business of making meaning of human life was now being done. A related shift involved the sacralization of everyday life (the necessary parallel process of the secularization of religious phenomena), which drew on the philosophy of Heidegger (among others), whose notion of 'being in the world' (*Dasein*) and resolute refusal of metaphysics presented humans as temporal beings, thrown into the already existing matrix and defined by awareness of mortality. The relation of the individual and the world posited by Heidegger hearkened back to the rich imaginative world of ancient Greece, and was compatible with the Western discovery of other faiths, particularly Eastern traditions, revived Paganism, and the differently-configured ontologies of indigenous peoples, including Native Americans and Australian Aborigines.

Ashcroft, Devlin-Glass and McCredden's treatment of Australian literature begins with the question of the relation of the sublime and the sacred, viewed in terms of the colonial experience of the vast alien-ness of the landscape, and the contradiction inherent in building a Christian, European-style nation in this incongruous land. The authors they concern themselves with engage actively in the dismantling of this nation, writing as they did at a time of high national confidence due to the gradual separation of Australia from Britain, the turn towards spiritual values other than those of Christianity, and the development of a dialogue with Aboriginal Australians that enabled white Australians to see the land very differently. Chapter One considers the novels of Nobel Prize winner Patrick White, with close readings of *The Tree of Man* (1955), *Voss* (1957), *Riders in the Chariot* (1961), and *A Fringe of Leaves* (1976). The authors make a strong argument that White's characters reject Christianity as the source of religious and spiritual authority, and through engagement with the everyday, a growing awareness of indigenous people and the land, and the transformative power of art, forge a new kind of awareness of the sacred.

Chapters Two and Three, which analyse the poetry of Francis Webb and James McAuley respectively, acknowledge that Roman Catholic Christianity informs these authors powerfully, and that therefore their articulation of an Australian sacred is less approving of the everyday. However, it is argued that they still engage passionately

with Australia as a place, and in McAuley's case his contrasting of Australia with Europe, modernity with the Christian past, became at times post-colonial; "[o]ne way in which the poetic dream of 'Australia' still holds potency is, ironically, in the acknowledgement of deep loss and defeat at the core of colonising imperatives" (117). Chapter Four, on Judith Wright, moves closer to the literary vision advanced by the authors. Wright, the privileged child of pastoralists who loved her upbringing in New England, came in adulthood to understand the cruel cost of that white colonialist life for Australia's Aborigines, and became an activist for the Australian land and its indigenous inhabitants (her long friendship with Oodgeroo Noonuccal, formerly Kath Walker, involved her promotion of indigenous writing to whites who were unaware of its existence). Chapter Five considers literature of the frontier, focused on Xavier Herbert's *Poor Fellow My Country* (1975), Kim Mahood's *Craft For A Dry Lake* (2000), and Alex Miller's *Journey to the Stone Country* (2003), all books that confront the fraught subjects of race relations in the outback, erotic relationships between Indigenous Australians and whites, and the utilization of Indigenous Dreaming stories by non-Indigenous writers. The earnest politically correct tone of the argument does not compromise the fact that important issues are raised and difficult questions addressed in the analysis.

Chapter Six, on Xavier Herbert's *Poor Fellow My Country* (1975), Kim Scott's *Benang: From the Heart* (1999), Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria* (2008), traverses some of the same territory as the previous chapter but makes more extensive reference to literature on Aboriginal Dreaming stories. The inconsistent use of terminology (oscillating between the outmoded 'Dreamtime' and the more acceptable scholarly 'Dreaming') is surprising and suggests that the authors are not fully conversant with anthropological and Religious Studies research on Australian Indigenous religion. The emphasis on deep ecological readings keeps the tone contemporary, as Australia wrestles in the twenty-first century with the devastating effects of climate change. Chapter Seven considers contemporary 'poetry of the sacred' including A.D. Hope, Les Murray, Kevin Hart, Robert Adamson, Robert Gray and indigenous poets Lionel Fogarty and Sam Wagan Watson. Chapter Eight, "The Earthed Sacred", uses the elements to consider Delia Falconer's *The Service of Clouds* (1997), associated with air, Tim Winton's *Cloudstreet* (1991), associated with water, Andrew McGahan's *The White Earth* (2004) and David Malouf's *Remembering Babylon* (1993), associated with earth. It seems unfortunate that the authors could not identify a work that could be associated with fire, to preserve the coherence and elegance of the interpretive framework.

This book is positioned to be well-received among academics in Australian literature and Australian Studies, and it may seem overly negative to draw attention to deficiencies that are basically the province of another discipline. Nevertheless, the book purports to be about "the sacred" and there are no academic works on the subject in the bibliography. The academic study of religion has generated a rich literature on the sacred (from Emile Durkheim through Mircea Eliade, to Victor Turner and contemporary theorists such as David Lyon and a myriad others), and the issues raised in the discussion of the phenomenon most significantly ask the question 'How does anything become designated as sacred?' This book treats the sacred as a *sui generis* discourse, which is not to be analysed in terms of human priorities, and this creates a quasi-theology that lacks rational explanatory power. Further, it may seem churlish to point out that the detailing of a discourse of the sacred that is

informed by Indigenous spirituality and awareness of the land by elite literary figures does not mean that such a discourse exists in the lives of contemporary Australians. This is a fundamental problem in the use of literature as evidence of trends in society. The local religio-spiritual context is similarly ignored: excellent recent research on Australian spirituality, such as Gary D. Bouma's *Australian Soul* (Cambridge University Press, 2006), is not mentioned at all. Perhaps this is because Bouma offers little, if any, empirical evidence that white Australians draw on Indigenous spirituality in their own religio-spiritual quests.

The book is littered with typographical and editing errors that are disconcerting to the reader. The following is an incomplete list (and the bibliography has not been checked at all): Papunya Tula is hyphenated incorrectly (16), St Augustine is listed as the author of the *Confessions* (footnote 40, 20) when the cited Penguin edition uses "Saint", *Morte d'Arthur* is missing "the" (23), '50s and '60s are used instead of 1950s and 1960s (33), the term "hierophany" is attributed to the Australian poet Vincent Buckley (1925-1988) rather than to Mircea Eliade (1907-1986), the Rumanian scholar of Religious Studies, reinforcing the authors' ignorance of other scholarly fields (35), "Voss'ss" has a redundant "s" (49), *zaddikum* rather than the correct Hebrew plural *zaddikim* (56), "Aboriginal" for "Aborigine" (57), "Laurie Herganhan" should be "Laurence Hergenhan" (note 33, 129), the statement "[f]or Judith Wright, as for James McAuley, whose poetic achievement is analysed in the next chapter" (160-161) when McAuley was the subject of the previous chapter, "Pseudo-Dionysis" for "Pseudo-Dionysus" (243), the italicisation of "Cambridge: Cambridge University Press" (note 3, 245), and the missing quotation mark in the citation of Lynn Poland's "The Idea of the Holy and the Sublime" (note 6, 293). The book makes an interesting, though partial and mostly unconvincing, argument about Australian spiritual preoccupations that is informed by deep ecology and indigenous spirituality. It provokes thought and offers some intelligent, nuanced readings of a range of Australian authors. *Intimate Horizons* will be of greatest interest to students of Australian Literature and Australian Studies.

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